

A Dignified End for New York's Forgotten Veterans,

By COREY KILGANNON, MAY 23, 2017



Pallbearers transporting coffins after the memorial service for the veterans Gilfred Sowell, Ernesto Garcia and Cesar Irizarry at the George Werst Funeral Home in Queens, N.Y., this month. Credit Kevin Hagen for The New York Times

Ernest R. Garcia's body sat for more than a month in his Bronx apartment before the authorities finally entered in January and found it decomposing.

"They had to bring in a fumigation team, the smell was so bad," said Clarence Smith, 73, a neighbor of Mr. Garcia, who had died of a heart attack at age 72.

Mr. Garcia had no savings or close relatives. His body went to a city morgue, which for unclaimed bodies like Mr. Garcia's can serve as a purgatory before ignominious burials in unmarked mass graves in the [potter's field](#) that New York City operates for the indigent dead, on Hart Island near the Bronx.

But there was one pivotal fact that steered Mr. Garcia away from this grim fate — he was a veteran, an Army corporal who had served honorably during the Vietnam War, and therefore entitled to a military burial paid for by the federal government at a national veterans cemetery.



The veterans Gilfred Sowell, Ernesto Garcia and Cesar Irizarry were honored with flag-draped coffins during a memorial service. Credit Kevin Hagen for The New York Times

Late in life, he wound up homeless and was placed in his Bronx apartment last year by city officials, who after his death recalled his veteran status and confirmed with federal officials that he was indeed eligible for a burial at Calverton National Cemetery on Long Island, complete with an honor guard and a flag-folding ceremony.

Though city and federal funds are available for a coffin and transportation to a cemetery, government officials do not handle the arrangements. Instead, they rely on an unofficial network of about a half-dozen veterans groups that volunteer to help provide ceremonies and burials for the 50 or so veterans who die poor and alone in New York City every year. A similar ad hoc system provides dignified send-offs for hundreds of poor veterans across the country.

In Mr. Garcia's case, city officials reached out to Paul Schottenhamel, 69, a retiree in Queens whose main duties these days are minding his young grandchildren and serving as the adjutant for the Queens County American Legion.

As Mr. Schottenhamel put it, a respectable coffin headed to Calverton is far preferable to the pine boxes used in the mass graves dug on Hart Island by inmates from Rikers Island.

He and other volunteers help schedule burials and organize viewings by engaging funeral homeowners to provide services for little or no fee. They recruit groups of veterans to attend because mourners who knew the deceased almost never come.



Veterans who are strangers to the deceased nonetheless turn out to honor their brothers-in-arms. Credit Kevin Hagen for The New York Times

James Mullarkey, commander of Post 222 of the Catholic War Veterans, said his group had organized memorial services for about 60 unclaimed veterans in the past 30 months, “and only once did a loved one show up — one veteran’s landlady who rented him a room.”

On a recent weekday, Mr. Mullarkey, an Army special forces captain who served in Vietnam, stood at the George Werst Funeral Home in Queens, gazing at three flag-draped coffins containing Corporal Garcia and two other service members — Gilfred D. Sowell and Cesar Irizarry, Air Force veterans who served during the Vietnam and Korean Wars, respectively.

Two dozen military veterans filed into the funeral home, which has held about 100 free services for unclaimed veterans and has donated coffins and transported bodies to Calverton.

Mr. Schottenhamel announced that the three veterans had been “called to the high command.” With no details known about their lives, the service was brief.

“We know nothing more about these men, but we don’t need to know anything more than that they honorably served their country,” said Mr. Schottenhamel, who served in Vietnam and has helped arrange burials for 52 veterans.



After New York’s Department of Veterans’ Services confirms an individual’s eligibility for a military burial, various veterans groups take it from there. Credit Kevin Hagen for The New York Times

Though special outreach and housing programs have reduced the number of homeless veterans in New York City to 500 today from about 5,000 five years ago, many veterans still die alone in shelters and on the street.

Cassie Erpenbeck, an outreach supervisor with the city’s Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, said workers check for military affiliation as part of the review process of all unclaimed bodies, including contacting hospitals, friends and neighbors and looking for any indication of military service, such as a military-themed tattoo, a snapshot in uniform or a military benefits card.

Possible veterans cases are then referred to Ines Adan, director for human services at the city’s Department of Veterans’ Services, who confirms eligibility for a military burial, something she has done for more than 400 unclaimed veterans since 2008, she said.

She then reaches out to veterans groups, whose names get listed on each unclaimed veteran's paperwork as "unrelated next of kin."

"We don't know what the circumstances were, where these folks became disenfranchised from their families," she said, "but they raised their hand for their country and for everything we hold dear, so they are eligible for their final honors."



Clarence Smith received the flag that adorned the coffin of his friend Ernesto Garcia at Calverton National Cemetery on Long Island. Credit Kevin Hagen for The New York Times

For unclaimed veterans, the National Cemetery Administration, part of the federal [Department of Veterans Affairs](#), offers up to \$2,069 for a coffin, up to \$163 for an urn, a \$300 burial allowance and additional funds for transportation to national veterans cemeteries.

Last year, Cemetery Administration officials said benefits were paid for the burials of 390 unclaimed veterans.

But many more burials have been financed and organized by groups like the Homeless Veterans Burial Program run by Dignity Memorial, a national network of funeral, cremation and cemetery service providers owned by Service Corporation International.

Since the burial program was established in 2000, it has helped bury more than 3,000 unclaimed veterans, officials said, all without government financing. "We feel it's a good enough cause to help out these veterans who might otherwise have ended up in a pauper's grave," said Bob Budway, a Navy veteran who runs Dignity Memorial in the New York City area.

The program expanded to New York six years ago to help organize the burial of 20 unclaimed veterans from New York City in a single ceremony at Calverton, with the help of the Missing in America Project, a volunteer network that contacts funeral homes, morgues and crematories nationwide to identify unclaimed veterans.



A motorcycle club, the Patriot Guard Riders, escorted the hearses to Calverton National Cemetery, then hoisted flags for Mr. Sowell, Mr. Garcia and Mr. Irizarry. Credit Kevin Hagen for The New York Times

At the recent service in Queens for the three veterans, Mr. Smith sat in front of Mr. Garcia's coffin and recounted how he and Mr. Garcia were staying together at the Bellevue Men's Shelter in Manhattan before being placed in housing in the Bronx.

Mr. Smith, also a Vietnam-era Army corporal, said he routinely checked on Mr. Garcia, and after weeks of not seeing him he became concerned. That is what led to the discovery of Mr. Garcia's body.

"I'm glad he's getting a proper burial, rather than ending up in potter's field," Mr. Smith said as funeral home staff members loaded the coffins into hearses and the aging veterans snapped to attention and saluted their military colleagues.

Flanked by a motorcycle escort, the Patriot Guard Riders, the hearses headed east on a 90-minute trip to Calverton, where so far this year about three dozen indigent vets have been interred.

At the cemetery, Pete Jepson, one of the Patriot Guard Riders, hopped off his Harley-Davidson and directed his riders to form a ceremonial walkway through which the coffins were guided to an alcove in a serene stand of pines.

Rifle shots sounded out and a bugler played taps. An honor guard — active service members in dress uniforms — conducted the ritual folding of the American flags taken off the coffins.

"These men are unsung heroes, but for whatever reason, they died alone," Mr. Jepson said. "And that's why we're here."